

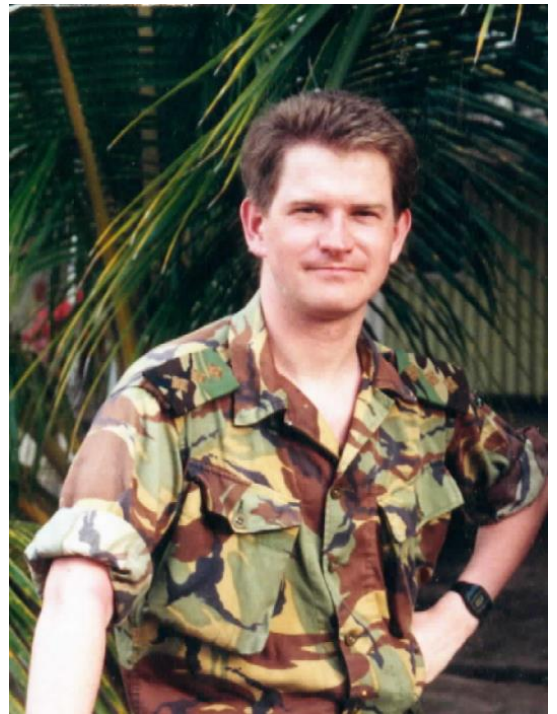
Philip Holmes' Biography 2023

I was born in rural Northern Ireland. This engendered in me a love of nature, the wonder of which I came to know from a very tangible, sometimes leg-scratching, exposure. I would vanish off for the day into the countryside bird-spotting or pond-dipping. I loved climbing trees, to sit as close to the tops as I could manage, relishing the powerful wind-sway of a tree in full leaf.



I was good at school. Benevolent senior relatives would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I would pipe up “conservationist”, influenced as I was by my ramblings and the exploits of Jacques Cousteau and David Attenborough. That didn’t really compute with them. They’d smile indulgently and wonder aloud if I shouldn’t go for a “proper” profession like becoming a teacher or a doctor. When I was in my teens and having to take that career choice, my elder brother, himself a doctor, counselled me against that profession. I remember his bizarre advice “You’re good at art, Philip; why don’t you become a dentist?” With three “A” grades behind me in my A levels, I took a brother’s dubious advice and joined Queen’s University Belfast dental school for a four-year bachelor’s degree course.

Aged 22, I decided that joining an NHS high street dental practice felt too much like potentially the start of a 40-year prison sentence. So, I elected for some excitement by joining the British Army, initially for three years. I didn’t want to commit to more than that. Those three years became seventeen in the end as I discovered the Army offered me a healthy variety with a regular change of scenery and postings as far afield as Germany, Inverness and Belize (pictured right). I even “earned” a medal following a brief spell of duty back home in Northern Ireland. I enjoyed a variety of employment with roles ranging from being a dental officer in a M.A.S.H.-type unit, to being an assistant anaesthetist in a field surgical team, to spending a fascinating three years as a desk officer at the MOD. I was allowed space to study, taking a coveted higher diploma in my own time, followed in 1995 by a one-year MSc course at the University of London which I passed with Honours. This course fuelled an interest in scientific research, my thesis leading to the publication of a research paper in the highly acclaimed journal *Dentomaxillofacial Radiology*. These days, my name appears as a footnote in dental textbooks! In 1995 I was also promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

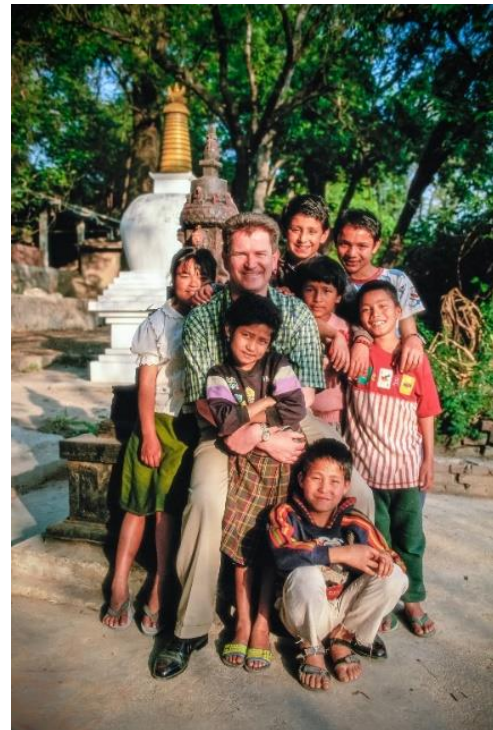


I married in 1988, my first wife being a Dutch Jew called Esther Benjamins. Professionally, she had been a social worker with the survivors of the Holocaust, before turning to study law in her spare time. Just before we married, Esther passed her Masters in Law and in 1998 was appointed to the Judiciary. This professional success concealed an underlying sadness in that she had been unable to realise her main ambition of becoming a mother. In 1998 this led to a major downturn in her mental health and in January 1999 Esther took her own life at the age of just 43.



In the midst of that trauma and heartbreak, I knew that I had to respond positively. Within just days of the suicide, I had decided to leave the Army and dentistry and set up a children's charity to perpetuate Esther's memory and high ideals. I chose to work in Nepal where I felt that I could build "Esther's family" through helping vulnerable children. No one could have been more underqualified than me for such an undertaking - I had never even been to Nepal - but I was determined and when I set my mind to do something, it happens.

My initial work involved rescuing innocent children from Nepalese prisons, children who had been imprisoned alongside parents in the absence of anyone else being willing or able to care for them. I set up a refuge that could offer this care and in December 1999, at the end of that tragic year, brought my first seven children out of Kathmandu jail (pictured right). I continued this work, prison by prison, freeing around 30 children, while at the same time raising awareness through the media. My work was covered in the international papers ranging from The Boston Globe to the Melbourne Herald Sun. In July 2000 I was profiled as cover story in the Weekend section of the Daily Telegraph. This coverage led to an avalanche of support and effectively launched the charity. I like to think this adverse exposure shamed the Nepal government into taking action and in November 2001 the government outlawed the jailing of innocent children.



In 2002, I shifted focus onto child trafficking, my charity being the first to research a hitherto unknown issue - the trafficking of Nepalese children across the open border into India to become "performers" inside Indian circuses. The children became slaves, trapped in de facto prisons, subject to physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Eighty percent of the children were girls with an average age of eight. Having done the research, we decided to do something about it. In 2004, I moved with my wife, Bev, to live in Nepal, so that I could head up a programme of circus rescues. This involved crossing the border into India and, in conjunction with the Indian authorities, removing the children from the circuses. These highly dangerous operations led to freedom for 350 children with a further 350 released voluntarily by the circuses in their bid to avoid bad publicity and the risk of prosecution.

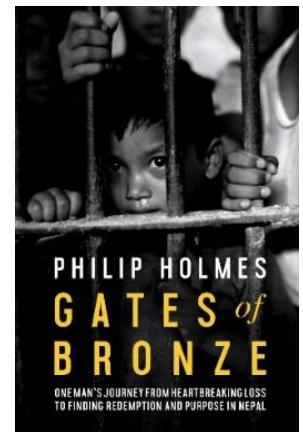


In 2006, following our legal action, a Nepalese court recognised the circuses as a trafficking destination and the first circus trafficker was imprisoned for 20 years. This set the legal precedent for a further 18 traffickers to be jailed. By the time of our last rescue in 2011, we were finding no Nepalese children inside circuses. That was because procurement had stopped (all the traffickers were in prison) and demand at the circuses had dried up. In April 2011, the Indian Supreme Court responded to a petition submitted by our partner, ChildLine India Foundation, and ruled that children under the age of 18 could not be used as performers. This put the seal of sustainability onto our closure of a child trafficking route - an unprecedented achievement by me and some very determined colleagues. It should be noted that we also managed the trafficking survivors very successfully. One girl, rescued in 2004 when she was aged 12 and with no education, was supported at our refuge and went on to pass her Bar Council exams in 2018. She is now a human rights activist in Kathmandu. We even formed our own circus group - Circus Kathmandu - that performed around the world, including at Glastonbury in 2014.

In November 2011, my team closed down a second child trafficking route - this had involved the trafficking of Nepalese children to an extreme "Christian" indoctrination centre in Tamil Nadu. This had been operated by the self-styled "India's Billy Graham", Dr PP Job, who was working with Nepal's biggest child trafficker, Dal Bahadur Phadera.

In an extremely dangerous mission, we brought the children back to Nepal after a nine-year absence and exposed this fake-orphan racket nationally and internationally in the media. This included in The Daily Telegraph – “[The Indian Preacher and the Fake Orphan scandal](#)”.

In 2012, I returned to the UK with my wife and two adopted Nepalese children. At this point, I decided after 13 years it was time to leave this charity and allow it to develop along its own lines (which were at variance with my own aspirations). It had very much served its purpose for me in commemorating Esther Benjamins through the closure of two child trafficking routes. Besides, I needed to take some time out to be with family, including elderly in-laws (since deceased) and to write my memoir, [Gates of Bronze](#), that I published in 2019.



In 2015, I registered a new charity, originally called ChoraChori (Nepali word for “children”) to continue my charitable involvement in Nepal. With time, this name became redundant as our initial work tackling child rape evolved into supporting all female survivors of sexual abuse. We had also provided community support during the earthquakes of 2015 and the floods of 2017. But above all, by 2020 I had become preoccupied by the climate emergency and respond with a reforestation programme. Under the new name of “Pipal Tree”, we began restoring the natural environment and forests in south Nepal, with the goal of planting 1,000,000 trees in this vital decade for the planet. I am presenting this to donors as a series of projects whereby public art is juxtaposed with reforestation. At the heart of this programme lies community engagement that supports the most vulnerable ethnic groups and women. The first of these launched in December 2021 as the Dhanusha Bird Park where we are pioneering the Miyawaki Method of rapid reforestation. This is designed to attract endangered species of birds to what had been a piece of degraded, over-grazed public land while at the same time attracting tourists to see these and the bird mosaics I have made to be sited around the perimeter of the plantation. My next project, launched in May 2022, was a Gurkha Memorial Forest Park to commemorate the 130,000 Nepali men who served in the Indian and British Armies since 1939. These included 13 Victoria Cross (VC) winners.



On a visit to Nepal in February 2022, I was invited to speak to an English class in a school in the east of the country. My message to these young teenagers, for whom the climate crisis really will be an existential threat, can be distilled as follows:

- Don't pursue financial wealth at the expense of living a fulfilling life
- Cling to your childhood dreams and aspirations – finally, at the age of 62, I had become both a conservationist and an artist.
- Never be overwhelmed by the scale of a challenge, believe that you're underqualified or told by “experts” that it can't be done. Just *make a start* and be prepared for the unexpected that will amplify your efforts.
- The solution to the climate crisis is already before us; it lies in the human aptitude for scientific discovery and creativity.

Maybe these children will remember my visit and be inspired, as I once was by David Attenborough and Jacques Cousteau.

In November 2022, I was awarded the “Entrepreneur for Good” prize at the finals of the Great British Entrepreneur Awards in a ceremony at Grosvenor House Hotel in Mayfair. But that was quickly trumped by being appointed OBE in the 2023 New Year's Honours List in recognition of my 23 years' service to vulnerable people in Nepal. I hope this is a major landmark on a road that leads ever upwards.